

## Chapter 08. Sāṃmitīya Antarābhava

According to Vasumitra, the Sāṃmitīya school originated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E. after the Mahāparinirvāṇa of the Buddha. As the school was derived from the Vātsīputrīya it continues to accept the doctrine of the pudgala which was also accepted by the Sāṃmitīya. The Sāṃmitīya also has another famous doctrine which is an innovation of their own. It is the doctrine or the avipraṇāśa, an important karma doctrine. Avipraṇāśa means non-perishing dharma referring to a person's karmic force which continues throughout the saṃsāric process. According to the Sāṃmitīya, when you do a karma, the corresponding effect is not due to the karma itself which is momentary. Actually it is due to the vāsanā (residual force) of the karma. This continues until the karma is retributed.

In the first line of the stanza from Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, it says, "that avipraṇāśa is like a document, and karma is like a debt. It is fourfold as regards in the realms of action, and indeterminate as regards in its moral nature." When a person borrow money from another person, how does he returns the money? He has got the document. It is the document that guarantees the repayment, not the debt.

In the Laksanānusāra, another text explains, "karma ceases as soon as it arisen. The non-perishing dharma does not cease, and it sustains the effect of karma causing it not to perish. The non perishing dharma is not momentary dharma; it is a dharma that ceases at the temporal juncture, it can endure for sometimes, and ceases only when the fruits has arisen."

The Buddha has said, "Karma-s does not perish throughout the innumerable kalpa-s. Then the assemblage of conditions obtains, it gives rise to retribution for the sentient beings."

The avipraṇāśa is like the prakti of the Sarvāstivāda. The difference is that whereas prakti applies in the case of all dharma-s, avipraṇāśa operates in the domain of karma only. In prakti, a force is required to link the dharma to a sentient being, but for the avipraṇāśa, it is confined as a force preserving the karma efficacy.

The Sāṃmitīya also shared the doctrine of antarābhava. *Antarābhava* is an intermediate state between death and the next life. It is one of the main controversial topics found in the Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra, Abhidarmakośa, Sāṃmitīya Abhidharma, and Satyasiddhi śāstra. The theory of antarābhava is shared by Sarvāstivādins, Sāṃmitīya, Yogācāra and Mahāyānists; but criticized by Vibhajyavādins. The Vibhajyavādins generally referred to the Mahīśāsaka, the Dharmagupta, and the Kāśyapīya which prevailed in the Kāśmīra region. (Yin Shun, *Study on Sarvāstivāda and its Masters*, pp 412.)

In the Āgama, the term antarābhava, is often translated into Chinese as *zhong yin* (中阴), *zhong you* (中有). The term "beings of intermediate state" is used in the Saṃyuktāgama. It is said when antarābhava enters a mother's womb, the mother has desire debate with others. The fortune-teller predicts that the baby in the womb will know all śāstras. And when antarābhava enters a mother's womb, the mother's mind become pure, temperate and benevolent without any desire and her body

becomes soft, it is foretold that the boy will become an arahat.<sup>1</sup>

In the Dīrghāgama, the Buddha condemns those Brahmans who disbelieve the rebirth: “There are some Bhikṣus who obtained the heavenly vision (divya-cakṣur) from the practice of samādhi can see beings dying here and taking rebirth in another state following their actions.”

Debates over Antarābhava among Ābhidharmikas

The Satyasiddhi śāstra (成實論) has two chapters dedicated to antarābhava.

The Satyasiddhi-śāstra; 16 fasc., T 1646.; is translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什. It is a scholastic text that analyzes all existences into 84 elements. It also introduces the conceptions of emptiness that are very Mahāyānistic. The text is attributed to Harivarman 訶梨跋摩. Based on this text, the Satyasiddhi school was established in China as one of the thirteen Chinese schools.

From this śāstra, we can see some discussions during that time around 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. (before Kumārajīva) between the Sarvāstivāda-s and Sautratika-s. The final argument concluded that the Satyasiddhi does not support the existence of *antarābhava*.

## Sāṃmitīya

The doctrine of this school can be found in the Sāṃmitīya Śāstra, one of the Sāṃmitīya Abhidharma text preserved in the Chinese translation.

One of the third contents in the Śāstra deals with antarābhava. The Sāṃmitīya debates with other schools to support their theory of antarābhava. Recent research on Sāṃmitīya based on Chinese sources made by Bhikṣu Thich Thien Chau concludes that the Sāṃmitīya supports the existence of intermediate states.

## The Sāṃmitīya-nikāya-śāstra

Sāṃmitīyas' doctrine preserved in the Sāṃmitīya-nikāyaśāstra (pinyin: San mi ti pou loun 三弥底部论) Taisho, T32, No.1649, 469b-471c. At end of the text, it says the original title of the text is 依说论 Āśraya-prajñapti-śāstra. The second part of the book deals with the pudgala concerning life after death and the origin of the course of existence.

Who transmigrates? The pudgala in the intermediate existence (antarābhava).

There are three adverse opinions:

1. only the five aggregates go from this life to the next. Vijñāna and karma determine the rebirth.
2. the person alone without five aggregates.
3. no person.

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<sup>1</sup>

T2, 99, p.178b.

The Sāṃmitīyas' answer.

1. the pudgala, by means of the intermediate existence, passes on and is reborn in another destiny. The divine eye alone is capable to perceive the antarābhava.
2. the person alone cannot go to the other destiny (the person should not be separated from the aggregates).

Here, this implies that the antarābhava is a kind of aggregates.

### **How does the intermediate existence appear?**

At the moment when a man is about to die, the intermediate existence is on the point of manifesting itself. The abandonment of the human five aggregates and the arising the five intermediate aggregates are taken simultaneously.

### **Is there an origin to the series of existences?**

The origin of saṃsāra is inconceivable. It is not men who are provided with original persons; if they were so provided, the cycle of birth and death would be infinite. Due to the evolution of thirst (tṛṣṇā), the Buddha declares that the origin of lives in the past is inconceivable.

Sāṃmitīyas always affirmed that: "The pudgala exists in relation to the aggregates and transmigration." The person is veiled by ignorance (avidyā), consequently, it transmigrates. In other words, "when the elements (dharmas) reach the mind (citta), rely on it and then transmigrate, the Buddha calls that the person (pudgala). The pudgala is thus something that "separate" from the elements, then it is possible to say that the elements are impermanent, but it is impossible to say whether the pudgala is permanent or impermanent. Hence, we can understand the expressible or inexpressible nature of the origin of life. The cycle of birth and death therefore does not possess any origin.

### **Ten of the adversaries arguments on the intermediate existence**

1. The Buddha does not mention antarābhava.
2. The Buddha does not speak of the categories of living beings.
3. The Buddha does not speak of karma leading to antarābhava.
4. The Buddha clearly mentions the five destinies but does not mention antarābhava.
5. The Buddha says that rebirth in the Avīci hell, after death, is immediate.
6. If antarābhava exists, there would be another one between the intermediate existence and birth, etc.
7. Antarābhava does not possess any of the specific characteristics of life.
8. Impossibility of conceiving
9. The Buddha does not speak of the characteristics of antarābhava.
10. The Buddha says that birth takes place an instant after the decease of the present body.

## The answers from Sāṃmitīyas

1. It is like the vehicle of the five destinies. The Buddha does not speak of it in the context of the five destinies.
2. It is not a destiny. But it is a stage for the transfer of the faculty of life (jīvitendriya).
3. A man receives the results of his actions and undergoes rebirth in the six destinies, but not in the antarābhava.
4. The Buddha himself says that there are many things to be taught but that he cannot speak of them all.
5. There is no intermediate existence in the Avīci hell, because there is no intervening destiny in the course of rebirth.
6. It cannot be demonstrated in a conclusive manner by the existence, for example, of intermediate meditation (dhyānāntara).
7. It enables a person to reach and be reborn in another destiny.
8. After having passed into the intermediate existence, one receives the birth existence (upapattibhava). These two existences are similar because the former is the vehicle and the latter the destination.
9. It is because the Buddha wishes to avoid disputes on the existence or non-existence of that intermediate stage that he does not speak of it.
10. It is because the birth existence has not yet appeared that the body must pass through the intermediate existence to reach the other existence.

## Ten arguments used to demonstrate the intermediate existence

The Sāṃmitīya śāstra cites the words of the Buddha aimed at demonstrating the intermediate existence.

1. Attachment to the intervening stage (intermediate existence) should be abandoned.
2. There exists an individual composed of a mind-made body (manomayakāya) of thirst (*tṛṣṇā*) and of appropriation (upādāna).
3. The intermediate existence from which one attains Parinirvāṇa, among the five categories of the non-returner (anāgāmin).
4. The body cannot reach the other existence; it is therefore necessary to have another subtle body so that consciousness (vijñāna) can reach the other existence.
5. A person with diving eye (divyacakṣus) can see the intermediate existence.
6. The Buddha speaks of the existence of the gandhara, one of the three elements which constitute the embryo. That is an affirmation of the intermediate existence.
7. Because of mutual relations, the intermediate existence is necessary for a transitional domain to exist (between death and rebirth).
8. The example of the seeds and seedlings: seeds give rise to seedlings and seedlings yield seeds. The seed corresponds to the previous existence, the

seedling corresponds to the intermediate existence and the seed produced by the seedling corresponds to the birth existence.

9. The illumination of the world by the Bodhisattva (the Buddha before his last birth), when he descended from the Tusita heaven and entered his mother's womb.
10. The existence of the changing of the mind (*citta*) which occurs at the moment when one is on the point of receiving the new birth. Without the intermediate existence, this changing cannot be accomplished.

### Criticism of the adversaries

1. The intervening state consists of the six consciousnesses (*vijñāna*), but not of the intermediate existence.
2. The combination of the mind-made body (*manomayakāya*), thirst (*ṭṣṇā*) and appropriation (*upādāna*) means the combination of attachment to the taste of meditation (*dhyāna*) and thirst, but not to the intermediate existence.
3. Attaining Parinirvāṇa in the intervening state does not mean attaining Parinirvāṇa in the intermediate existence.
4. The fact of reaching the other existence is comparable to the appearance of the shadow or of an impression of being lightly touched. This is the manner in which the death existence (*maraṇabhava*) precedes the birth existence (*upapattibhava*). That is why the intermediate existence is not necessary.
5. The supernormal power of the divine eye (*divyacakṣus*) enables it to perceive subtle destinies, but not the intermediate existence.
6. The Buddha speaks of the *gandharva* by giving that word the meaning of a being which aims at its destiny or is guided by the power of good or bad actions. The *gandharva* does not imply the intermediate existence.
7. Mutual relations can be manifested from the death existence (*maraṇabhava*) to the birth existence (*upapattibhava*), but not from the death existence to the intermediate existence.
8. The example of the seeds and seedlings is dangerous (for your position) because, according to that example, on leaving a human existence, if one were reborn in the intermediate existence, one would not be able to be reborn in another human existence.
9. The citation is wrong. The illumination of the Bodhisattva takes place while he is in the process of becoming a Buddha, that is, during the time which separates the Bodhisattva state from that of Buddhahood, but not in the intermediate existence.
10. The changing of the mind (*citta*) which occurs at the moment of rebirth is similar to the following example: One dreams of Pañca-Mathurā and one perceives Mathurā: there is no intervening country. That proves that there is no intermediate existence.

### The confirmation by the Sāṃmitīyas

1. According to the discourse, the intermediate existence certainly exists. It is the Buddha who, with his divine eye, sees living beings who come and go with their actions (*karman*) in the cycle of birth and death.

2. Leaving the human destiny, after death, one is reborn in other destinies.

## Sarvāstivāda

The *Abhidharma-dharma-skandha-pāda śāstra* (阿毗达磨法蕴足论) quotes from *Āgama*, *Phālguna Sūtra* (颇勒婆那经) and *Svāti Sūtra* (莎底经) to support the theory of *gandharva* (健达缚).<sup>2</sup>

The *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā-śāstra* defines *gandharva* as “one seeks for incense to subsist” in the realm of desire (*kāma-dhātu*).<sup>3</sup>

The *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* lists five names for the *antarābhava*:<sup>4</sup>

1. Willpower accomplished (意成) i.e., exists due to willpower.
2. Seeking for birth (求生),
3. Consuming incense (食香) that is, takes the scent as food.
4. Intermediate existence (中有) i.e., exists between life and death.
5. Temporary arising (lit. the concept of arising名起) i.e., temporary exists.

The above five terms are enumerated by the Buddha, thus the text claims the existence of *antarābhava*.

It also says, *antarābhava* exists, discernible in the continuity of changing dharmas, to continually exist within the momentariness of constant change, just like grain that continues to exist.<sup>5</sup>

The Sarvāstivādins explain that once in this state, it is transformed into an entity called a *gandharva* (健达缚), “one seeks for incense to subsist”. Possessing subtle versions of all five aggregates reflective of one’s next birth, for most people in this state some perception is possible but willpower is limited to finding an appropriate womb to descend into. The common view ascribes the *gandharva* forty-nine days to accomplish this task.

Advanced practitioners known as *non-returns*, however, can attain *nirvāṇa* from this state. This conception was readily accepted into the Mahāyāna, where it gave rise to a variety of beliefs and practices designed to help the recently deceased in order to alter their destined rebirth.

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<sup>2</sup> T26, 1537, p.508a.

<sup>3</sup> T27, no.1545, 363a: 食香而存济.

<sup>4</sup> T29, no.1558, 55b:  
由佛世尊以五种名说中有故。何等为五。一者意成。从意生故。非精血等所有外缘合所成故。二者求生。常喜寻察当生处故。三者食香。身资香食往生处故。四者中有。二趣中间所有蕴故。五者名起。对向当生暂时起故。如契经说。有坏自体起。有坏世间生。起谓中有。

<sup>5</sup> T29, no.1558, 44b: 且依正理中有非无。现见世间相续转法。要处无间刹那续生。且如世间谷等相续。有情相续理亦应然。刹那续生处必无间。

## The Size and Form of Antarābhava

Regarding the physical size of the *antarābhava*, the Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra says, ‘in the desire realm, it just like a baby of five and six years old. In the realm of form, its body is the same as his/her physical body.’<sup>6</sup>

The Yogācārabhūmi says: one with unwholesome karma like black or dark night, the *antarābhava* of wholesome one like the color of white cloth, or a bright night. Also, the unwholesome one look at ground walking, those reborn in heaven walk while gazing up; those reborn gaze horizontally.<sup>7</sup>

### “Seven Sevens”

The most detail explanation on intermediate existence can be found in Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra.<sup>8</sup> It first appears in the Vibhāṣā,<sup>9</sup>

- Venerable Śarmadatta (设摩达多) asserts that *antarābhava* can live the maximum seven sevens, for forty-nine days where it will definitely take rebirth.
- Venerable Vasumitra (世友) holds that *antarābhava* can live a maximum seven days, their body cannot sustain any longer than that.
- Bhadanta Dharmatrāta (大德) affirms that the life of *antarābhava* is not fixed but according to the conditions.

Later the *Abhidharmakośa* and *Samyuktabhidharma-hṛdaya-śāstra*<sup>10</sup> employs the Vibhāṣā’s explanation. But the *Abhidharmakośa* comments thus:

“Venerable Vasumitra says that the maximum life span is seven days, if the conditions of rebirth does not fall into place, it will die and live many times.”<sup>11</sup>

During the span of seven days, the *antarābhava* may die and be reborn many times. This idea later was developed in Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra where it synthesizes the Abhidharma theory:

If it has no condition of rebirth, it will stay seven days; if it has conditions of rebirth, its life span will not be determined. If it has no conditions of rebirth after seven days, it will die and be reborn. The maximum life span of the *antarābhava* is seven days. If there are no conditions for rebirth, it will continue to die and be reborn, until “seven sevens”. Then it will definitely have the conditions of rebirth.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> T27, no.1545, 361b: 问中有形量大小云何。答欲界中有如五六岁小儿形量。色界中有如本有时形量圆满。See also T1546. 28. 267c. T1547. 28. 518c

<sup>7</sup> 瑜伽師地論T30, no.1579, 282a: 造惡業者所得中有。如黑闇光或陰闇夜。作善業者所得中有。如白衣光或晴明夜。...又造惡業者。眼視下淨伏面而行。往天趣者上。往人趣者傍。

<sup>8</sup> T30, no.1579, pp279b-283b.

<sup>9</sup> T27, no.1545, 361b. See also T1546. 28. 267c. T1547. 28. 518c

<sup>10</sup> 雜阿毘曇心論T1552. 28. 959a

<sup>11</sup> T29, no.1558, 46b: 尊者世友言。此极多七日。若生缘未合。便数死数生。

<sup>12</sup> 瑜伽師地論T30, no.1579, 282a-b:

Later Chinese writers follow the “seven sevens” tradition. It can be found in later writing such as Zongjing lu.<sup>13</sup> For Pure Land, if one recalls the name of the Amitābha Buddha, at the moment of death, the Buddha will receive one into the Pure Land where one will be reborn as a lotus in the pool. The lotus will blossom after 49 days.<sup>14</sup>

The antarābhava is one of the main controversial topic among the Ābhidarmikas. The Sarvāstivāda, Sāmmiṭiya and early Mahāyāna all believe in the *antarābhava* and the Chinese inherited this *antarābhava* doctrine from these traditions.

The Yogācārabhūmi claims that the self-attachment creates the form of *antarābhava*: “In the case of a worldling, so long as the dying being is still conscious, the self-attachment (*ātma-sneha*) that he has been practicing for a long time manifests, due to which he fears his non-existence, and is thereby, and a delight in his personal existence arise, making him subject to the intermediate existence and rebirth. A stream entrant or once-returner can overcome this self-attachment through wisdom, and it does not occur to a non-rerturner.”<sup>15</sup>

Some people may not have *antarābhava*, for example, those who will directly go to heaven or go to Avīci hell. This also shows *antarābhava* is impermanent. *Antarābhava* only has a short life span: seven or forty-nine days, thus they are impermanent. The intermediate existence is another manifestation of the five *khandhas*. They are creation of *one's karma and desire* thus they are *anicca, dukkha* and *anatta*.

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又此中有。若未得生緣極七日止。有得生緣即不決定。若極七日未得生緣死而復生。極七日止。如是展轉282.2未得生緣。乃至七七日止。自此已後決得生緣。

<sup>13</sup> 宗鏡錄Zongjing lu (Record of the Mirror of Orthodoxy) T47, 831a, written by Yanshou延壽 (904-975), who is considered as the patriarch for both Chan and pure land.

<sup>14</sup> 佛說觀無量壽佛經T12, no.365, 346a.

<sup>15</sup> Ven. Dhammjeti's translation (unpublished). T30, 281b.